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ABSTRACT

This policy brief presents updated information on charter schools, particularly on developments in the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) region. Contents include a letter from Toivola-Meadowlands Charter School students and interviews with two parents from the Toivola-Meadowlands, Minnesota, Charter Schools. The parents report that the implementation process is strenuous, but is offset by a decrease in bureaucracy, increased parent and student involvement, and more innovations in teaching. Proposed and recent legislation regarding charter schools is described for the following states: Illinois, Michigan, California, Arizona, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. (LMI)

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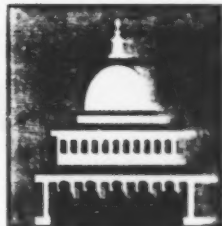
Policy Briefs

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Charter Schools Update

Editor's Note: NCREL's special issue of Policy Briefs on "Charter Schools: A New Breed of Public Schools" (Special Policy Report 2, 1993), has been distributed widely throughout the United States since its publication in August. This Policy Update was developed to respond to numerous requests for further information on the topic and to follow up on recent developments concerning Charter Schools, particularly in the NCREL region. It cannot possibly be as inclusive as the original report, but provides information that was not available when the original report was published. The opinions expressed in this update do not necessarily reflect the views of the NCREL staff or board of directors. We hope you find the information useful.

Other Points of View on Charter Schools

We received letters from Senators David Durenberger (R-MN) and Paul David Wellstone (DFL-MN) requesting that we publish the views of students and parents from the Toivola-Meadowlands, Minnesota, Charter Schools. The students wrote a "Letter to the Editor" in response to the original report on Charter Schools, and we interviewed for this update two parents who have been involved in the school.

Policy Briefs
are reports on
the status of
current issues
in education
from a national
perspective.
descriptions of
actions and
agendas in the
NCREL region.
commentaries
by experts from
their particular
point of view,
and resources
for further
information.

Unedited Letter to the Editor from Toivola-Meadowlands Charter School Students

November 5, 1993

Dear Editor,

We, the students of Toivola-Meadowlands Charter School, would like to respond to the interview given by Daniel Mobilia concerning our school. Mr. Mobilia was not updated on the events occurring within TMCS at the time of the interview, and we would like to take this opportunity to make some corrections. It is true that Charter Schools are exempted from some requirements to allow them to be innovative, but the examples given in that article are not true. Mr. Mobilia stated that charters are exempt from hiring certified teachers. That is not the case in Minnesota. The Minnesota law requires charters to have certified teachers, and that includes the Toivola-Meadowlands Charter. Also expressed in the interview was the exemption of having principals. Charters have that exemption, but so do all other independent school districts in Minnesota. Under the Laws of Minnesota for 1993 amended from the Minnesota [Statutes of] 1992 under Sec. 15 it states that each public school building in an independent school district may be under the supervision of a principal who is assigned to that responsibility by the board of education for that school district upon recommendation of the superintendent of that school district. The word "may" gives the choice to the TMCS to take an alternative plan of a board of directors and a site base management team instead of a traditional principal.

These options make the school run more smoothly and efficiently. As a matter of fact, TMCS recently elected a new board of directors on October 27, 1993. We had an excellent turn out of 65% of all parents/guardians and staff members of the voting membership.

Many people do not understand charters, and it's hard to explain how one works without inviting a person to see one in operation. Charters allow students to be creative and to have more responsibility in their education. Students here have the chance to explore interests in a style that makes it very educational and fun. Charters also give the students actual experiences of dealing with the business world. Right now we have students who have started their own businesses within the school, such as piano lessons and wood crafts. By starting their own business the students learn a number of things. Communication skills, organization, problem solving, budgeting, and responsibility are just a few. Other students are involved in the coordination of activities for the school. Organizing a rock climbing trip to UMD or skiing at Giants Ridge are some examples. And unlike many other schools, we encourage our students to do community service. This can involve the examples above plus anything from janitorial to working in a day care center to doing projects in the community.

Charter schools are definitely a jump from traditional schools, but if not given the chance to succeed, we will never know what they can accomplish.

The TMCS Speech Drama Class

Illinois Update

Legislation on Charter Schools has been introduced by Lee Daniels (R-Elmhurst). Governor Jim Edgar, in his "State of the State Address" in January, praised Charter Schools as an innovation in education for Illinois that he would propose. Patrick O'Malley (R-Palos Park) has sponsored the Governor's Charter School legislation. The legislation is now pending in the Illinois General Assembly. Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago has made Charter Schools one of his goals

for 1994. The Illinois State Board of Education is discussing "Principles for Evaluation of Legislative Proposals on Charter Schools." Seven principles intended to be safeguards in governing the formation of Charter Schools are under discussion. However, no agreement on the support of Charter Schools or the principles has been made at this time. The Illinois PTA convention recently adopted the "Illinois PTA position on Charter Schools."

Proposed Illinois State Charter Legislation Sponsored By Representative Lee Daniels

Legislation proposed by Rep. Lee Daniels (R-Elmhurst) would amend the School Code, authorizing the creation of Charter Schools in all school districts. It would establish a seven-member Illinois Charter Schools Commission to administer the Charter Schools Law and provide that members of the Commission are to be appointed to staggered four-year terms by the Governor. If the governing body of a Charter School is a college or university or public community college, the proposed legislation provides that the Illinois Board of Higher Education must approve the charter before it takes effect. The proposed legislation also adds provisions concerning the manner of approval of a Charter School contract, material contract revision, and release of a charter school from state laws and regulations. It provides that a Charter School shall be:

- a public school accountable to its sponsor
- operated in a nonsectarian, nonreligious, non-home-based manner
- subject to statutory and constitutional prohibitions against discrimination
- prohibited from charging tuition
- administered by a governing body in a manner provided by the charter

The proposed legislation authorizes Charter Schools to negotiate for the use, operation, and maintenance of school buildings and grounds on a rent-free basis with colleges, universities, and other entities. It also prescribes certain terms that are required to be included in a Charter School application and contract. If the Charter School is to be established by converting an existing public school to Charter School status, this move must have the approval by a majority of the certified teachers at the school, by a majority of the parents and guardians of pupils enrolled in the school, and (in Chicago) by the local school council before an application may be submitted or received for consideration to establish the designated school as a Charter School. Finally, the proposed legislation adds provisions relative to charter terms and renewals, employee options, financing, evaluation, and reporting.

**Excerpt from the Illinois State
of the State Address to the 88th
General Assembly by Governor
Jim Edgar**

January 12, 1994

This year, I will propose legislation to create at least a dozen Charter Schools throughout Illinois. Schools that are organized from the bottom up, schools where principals, teachers, parents and, yes, even students can act to make education more responsive, more relevant, and more exciting without having to answer to layers of bureaucracy and being shackled by overly restrictive mandates.

Indeed, Illinois is ready, I believe, to experiment with having the private sector manage our schools as has occurred in Baltimore and Minneapolis.

Some reforms will work. Others may not. But we're not going to know the answers unless we try, and we do know right now that the status quo is not working in many schools throughout the state.

So let us be innovative—let us help pioneer Charter Schools.

**Excerpt from *Springfield Scene*
(The Illinois Chamber)**

April 4, 1994

"Charter schools proposal advances"

The Governor's Charter School legislation, S.B. 1716, sponsored by Senator Patrick O'Malley (R-Palos Park), advanced out of the Senate Education Committee on a 6-2-1 vote. It will receive a second reading in the Senate. The Illinois Chamber, with its fellow statewide business groups

and the school management alliance, testified in support of the measure.

Statewide labor groups, including both statewide teachers' unions, registered opposition to the legislation, primarily on the basis that all of the personnel mandates embedded throughout the school code (notably collective bargaining, tenure, teacher certification) and curricular mandates would not be required for Charter Schools.

A previous *Springfield Scene* stated that Charter Schools should have maximum freedom to devise programs that allow their students to demonstrate the highest level of competencies in given topic areas. By reducing the number of state-mandated processes, the school board and the charter applicant can focus programs on performance.

The Illinois Chamber is working with Senator O'Malley and the Governor's office to draft an amendment that clarifies several provisions of the bill. This amendment will be considered by the Education Committee this spring.

**Illinois PTA Legislation Position
Statement**

Position on Charter Schools

It is the position of the Illinois PTA that charter schools could be a viable part of the reform initiative. They could provide a vehicle for change and innovation by creating new kinds of schools within the public school structure. The Illinois PTA also considers charter schools to be only a small piece of school reform. They should not be viewed as a means of

improving the overall quality of education in Illinois, nor as a means of solving the school funding issue. Charter schools are but one option in a continuum of educational reform.

The Illinois PTA will support legislation creating charter schools that meets the following specific conditions:

1. Charter schools must not be operated for a profit; nor affiliated with a non-public sectarian, religious or home-based school. (Public funds must not be used for private schools. An Illinois PTA Continuing Position)
2. Charter schools must be open to all students regardless of sex, race, religion, national origin, ancestry, pregnancy, marital or parental status, sexual orientation, or physical, mental, emotional, or learning disability.
3. Charter schools must not charge tuition or fees which might preclude attendance and full participation by economically disadvantaged students.
4. There must not be any negative impact on currently existing schools.
5. New monies must be made available to fund charter schools; and the state must work to improve funding for existing elementary and secondary schools until it provides the primary cost of public education.
6. Charter schools must be subject to all federal and state laws which deal with health and safety, and prohibit discrimination; and must be subject to the Freedom of Information and Open Meetings Acts.

7. A charter school must be accountable to the local board of education of the district in which it is located.

8. In order to insure the highest standards of teaching, teachers must be certified.

Michigan Update

Michigan Legislation on Public School Academies

Michigan passed Public Act 363 late in 1993 that allows the creation of Public School Academies—Michigan's version of the Charter School concept. According to the legislation, "A public school academy is a body corporate and is a governmental agency." The Governor strongly supports the concept.

The following are major features of Michigan Public School Academies:

1. Any individual or organization (except a religious group), such as governing boards of any local school district, intermediate school district, community college governing board, or the governing board of a public state university, may propose and be authorized to run a public school academy.
2. No numerical limit is placed upon the number of public school academies established.

California has 45 Charter Schools. The state does not offer start-up monies to get the schools going, so progress in numbers has been slow compared to states where start-up monies are available, such as Massachusetts.

California and Arizona Updates

As mentioned in the original issue of *Policy Briefs on Charter Schools*, California's general election ballot in November 1993 included a referendum (Proposition 174) that would have allowed parents to use vouchers to pay for private schooling. This referendum was viewed by many as a threat to the future of California's Charter Schools. In California, as in Oregon and Colorado, the voucher referendum was defeated by a margin of at least two to one. Colorado voucher proponents have begun a new campaign on the issue, hoping to put it on the ballot in 1994. Why the referendum in California—which was very popular when first proposed—was so strongly defeated is being discussed widely. If nothing else, it is obvious that if such referendums are to pass, they must appeal to middle-of-the-road as well as conservative voters.

California has 45 Charter Schools. The state does not offer start-up monies to get the schools going, so progress in numbers has been slow compared to states where start-up monies are available, such as Massachusetts.

Today, people are looking to Arizona, where the voucher issue is very alive if not altogether well. Both Charter Schools and a pilot voucher program are included in education reform bills. House Bill (HB) 2585 includes the voucher program; Charter Schools are included in both HB 2585 and Senate Bill (SB) 1375. Both bills have been discussed by the education committees in their respective houses and referred to the appropriations committees. SB 1375 has tied significantly more monies to the Charter

School proposal alone. Both bills have created a stand-off. The most contentious disagreements have been over the voucher issue, which has brought to the surface "wars" not necessarily related to vouchers. Both the Governor and the Republican majorities in the House and Senate support vouchers and Charter Schools as an essential part of their education reform package. Vouchers, however, have *not* turned out to be a partisan issue; there is some support for vouchers on both sides. Democrats had expected a division along party lines, but it did not occur. It appears that Arizona will see a long struggle to decide these issues.

Massachusetts Update

Massachusetts has given initial approval to 15 applications for Charter Schools. The Massachusetts charters will be run by teachers, parents, and community groups, but also by private management for-profit groups, such as the Edison Project, created by Whittle Communications Corporation. The Edison Project won charters in three cities.

Minnesota Update

New Charters

Three Charter School applications were submitted to the Minnesota State Board of Education (MSBE) for approval, according to Bill Allen, who coordinates Charter School proposals for the Minnesota Department of Education.

The following application was approved:

New Country School in LeSueur will be a secondary school with a "computer-infused curriculum" and appren-

ticeships and activities in the community. It will receive support from the Community Learning Centers project that has grant money from the New American Schools Development Corporation. The project was approved by the LeSueur Board of Education.

The following applications are still pending:

Emily Community School in Emily is a K-12 program already open with private funding, serving about 75 students. The Crosby-Ironton School Board voted 3-3 on the proposal, meaning that the decision rests with the MSBE.

Sudbury School in Roseville is based on a Massachusetts model that organizes the school as if it were a small town. It has some elements of the Summerhill model. The Roseville Board voted against the proposal 3-2. Board members indicated that their reluctance was based on the inability of the district to provide adequate performance assessment.

Wisconsin Update

The issue of *Policy Briefs* on Charter Schools featured new legislation in Wisconsin to create Charter Schools. In the months following enactment of Wisconsin's Charter School law, it became apparent that some provisions in the 1993 legislation would cause difficulties for ten participating districts in their efforts to create Charter Schools. In a cooperative effort to correct the situation, the school districts, the Department of Public Instruction, and the Governor's Office developed legislative proposals to increase the flexibility

of school districts and clarify areas of uncertainty and confusion in the law. The proposals have been included in the governor's review bill, which will be addressed by the state legislature.

In brief, according to an analysis by the Legislative Reference Bureau, the proposed bill includes the following changes in the provisions for governing Charter Schools:

1. The requirement that all Charter School employees remain school district employees is deleted; but private Charter School employees would not participate in the Wisconsin Retirement System (WRS).
2. The contract between the school board and the Charter School is allowed to specify which provisions in the laws that govern public schools will apply to the Charter School.
3. The proposed bill directs the state superintendent to establish requirements for licensure as a Charter School instructional staff member. To teach in a Charter School, an individual must hold a regular license or permit to teach, a Charter School instructional staff license, or a Charter School instructional staff permit from the state superintendent.
4. Eliminated is the provision that prohibits the school board from spending on average more per pupil enrolled in a Charter School than it spends on average per pupil enrolled in public schools. But it will require the petition or contract that establishes a Charter School to specify the anticipated average amount that the Charter School will spend per pupil enrolled in the Charter School in

the first year of the contract. Other explanations, justifications for spending, and reporting procedures also are specified on finances.

5. The school board will be allowed to enter a contract on behalf of the Charter School with other governmental units for services or joint power or duty required or authorized by law.
6. The bill allows a pupil to attend a Charter School located outside of his or her school residence district, as allowed for any public school outside the residential district.
7. The requirement to give preference in awarding contracts for the operation of Charter Schools to those that serve at risk children is eliminated.
8. Exemption from civil liability is extended to include Charter School employees.
9. The names of Charter School employees charged with or convicted of certain crimes or dismissal because of immoral conduct are to be reported to the state superintendent.

According to Raich, Charter Schools allow in-house decision-making, which eliminates "all of the bureaucracy of getting things done" and leads to better communication among parents, students, and teachers. Decisions are made by the teaching staff, paraprofessionals, community members working in the schools, and licensed educators, who meet several times during the week.

Parent Cannot Envision the Community Without a Charter School

Interview with Dick Raich, Parent, Meadowlands, Minnesota

by Aurelio Huertas, Jr., NCREL

In less than one year, student enrollment at Toivola-Meadowlands Charter School has increased from 162 students to 197, a 22-percent student increase, says Dick Raich, parent and board member of this recently established Charter School in Minnesota. He attributes the increase to the school's "flexibility" and its ability to bring local businesses and community expertise into the school. "I think under the present structure of education, this is one thing where small school districts fail. They don't have this type of flexibility to move within the structured system."

According to Raich, Charter Schools allow in-house decision-making, which eliminates "all of the bureaucracy of getting things done" and leads to better communication among parents, students, and teachers. Decisions are made by the teaching staff, paraprofessionals, community members working in the schools, and licensed educators, who meet several times during the week. "If a problem arises and you want to change something or bring in something new, you can do it right away," Raich says.

The Toivola-Meadowlands Charter School's open-door policy encourages parents to become more involved in their children's education, which Raich says was not the case several years ago.

Today, teachers at the school promote and solicit parental involvement as much as possible. "Teachers welcome parents in. They welcome ideas. They want to exchange ideas. The one thing they have worked on so much is communication within the community." Not surprisingly, Raich attributes much of the school's success to the community.

However, Raich is careful to point out that Charter Schools are not right for every community. "Why would you want to change something in a community where education is acceptable? They have the outcomes they want. They see what they want coming out of the public schools."

Moreover, Raich warns that the process of setting up a Charter School is very strenuous. He believes that the biggest problem is meeting the legal requirements for establishing a Charter School. "It takes a long time to set this up. Your letters of intent and the contracts—these sorts of things can be made easier." He points to the experiences of other districts that are in the process of setting up Charter Schools: "I know of several other schools that have been working on this for two and three years. They are having a heck of a time."

The Toivola-Meadowlands community has adapted so well to its Charter School that Raich finds it difficult to imagine not having a Charter School. "If Charter Schools fail, I really don't know how we are going to adapt back to the public education in the sense that it was before. Once the programs are set up, they have a track record, and everyone is comfortable with the direction, it can really take off."

Charter Schools: "I would like to see every district have the option to do this."

Interview of Tim Robinson, Parent, Meadowlands, Minnesota

by Aurelio Huertas, Jr., NCREL

Imagine a school where all members of the school community share a common vision for the school and are involved in decisions affecting curriculum, school structure, and instruction techniques. Now, stop imagining. Such a school really exists: Toivola-Meadowlands Charter School in Meadowlands, Minnesota.

Tim Robinson, who is one of the school's board members and has three children attending the school, says that community feedback on Charter Schools has been "very positive" since the decision was made to establish a Charter School. "Parents like the thought of having programs that are centered on learning in the community, teaching real world applications, and in which their children go out in the community to see what they learned."

The Charter School represents a unique partnership between the local school district and the Meadowlands community. The school seeks to revitalize education by involving the whole community. Parents are more involved in the educational process. Students have regained an interest in learning. Teachers are experimenting with innovative techniques.

Education at Toivola-Meadowlands Charter School extends far beyond pencils, paper, and textbooks. Students have input into what they believe they

need to learn, which encourages them to share the responsibility for learning. They also explore real-life applications of what they have learned through innovative, hands-on activities in the community.

"Parents like the thought of having programs that are centered on learning in the community, teaching real world applications, and in which their children go out in the community to see what they learned."—Tim Robinson

"All the hands-on stuff is what really connects it for the kids," explains Robinson. "What connects it for the parents is that they can be directly involved and they don't have 50 layers of bureaucracy to go through when they want to have input of how things are done."

Toivola-Meadowlands Charter School believes in challenging its students, especially in the use of technology.

"A lot of the course offerings are geared towards high technology, communications, and interpersonal relationship skills," says Robinson. The school also focuses on everyday skills from a new perspective. "We are taking family learning a little differently—*life skills* we call it," explains Robinson. "It is not just cooking skills and how to do your laundry, but about going out and interacting with young kids and seeing how they learn. Parenting is not as easy as kids think."

Although Robinson believes that Charter Schools offer many benefits, he also admits that even the most successful programs include a measure of failure—not every problem has a practical solution. For example, transportation is a concern

echoed by many Meadowlands residents. "I feel the transportation issue is inadequately addressed in the law," says Robinson. "When there is a transportation problem, there is no solution. This should be fixed."

Nevertheless, Robinson feels that Charter Schools are at the cutting edge of educational reform. He notes that "things may seem rocky at first," but he would like to see more states experiment with Charter Schools. "I would like to see every district have the option to do this."

Aurelio Huertas, Jr., is a staff writer for the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. He writes extensively on educational topics as well as alcohol, tobacco, and other drug-related prevention issues.

Excerpts from President Clinton's State of the Union Message

The New York Times (National), January 26, 1994

We must set tough world-class academic and occupational standards for our children. And give our teachers and students the tools they need to meet them. Our Goals 2000 proposal will empower individual school districts to experiment with ideas like chartering their schools to be run by private corporations or having more public school choice, to do whatever they wish to do as long as we measure every school by one high standard: Are our children learning what they need to know to compete and win in the global economy?

Goals 2000 links world-class standards to grass-roots reforms, and I hope Congress will pass it without delay.

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